

Nature, Nationalism or Nostalgia

On the Concept of Nature in Nordic Modernism

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LIVING IN THE NORTH

Ett lands arkitektur är en trollspegel, som visar i koncentrat människors behov och strävan, landets materiella tillgångar och tekniska resurser, sociala förhållanden, klimat och natur m.m. Leif Reinius, "Hus i Norge", *Byggmästaren* 1944:18.

My aim with this paper is to examine the concept of Nature in relation to Nordic modernistic architecture. Is it used to define a Nordic identity? The reflections are part of a project, where Swedish modernism is analysed in relation to different concepts, such as regionalism, humanism, traditionalism, and classicism. Texts by international and Nordic architects and theoreticians and contemporary presentations, mainly from the Swedish architectural journal *Arkitektur/Byggmästaren*, are compared with built examples.

The relation between Nordic and international is both complex and blurred. How is the concept of Nature interpreted in context with architecture, and which meaning does one give to it? Is it used to describe a specific identity, does there exist an idea that the relation to Nature is a Nordic distinction?

The concept of Nature is a common denominator in architectural theory, as in Vitruvius' anthropomorphic concept of beauty, or in and Laugier's thesis that the simple hut is the fundamental principle, from which eternal laws can be deduced. Adrian Forty described the difference between the world that man has created, *Culture*, and the world in which man lives, *Nature*. Forty said:

for most of the last five hundred years 'nature' has been the main, if not *the* principal category for organizing thought about what architecture is or might be.

According to Forty, only the modernism during the first half of the twentieth century denied the importance of Nature, but with the environmental movement during the sixties, nature regained its actuality. He described the modernistic attitude, with architecture understood as essentially different from nature, partly as a consequence of the scientific development, emphasising the difference between natural and artistic processes. Nature became of less interest for writers and artists, the innovative and creative processes were the important ones. Otto Wagner had formulated this, when he said that what was specific with architecture

was that it missed models in the nature, instead these were to be found in technology or in architecture as such. Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier were the exceptions, explained by Wright's connection with the romantic American tradition. In contrast, Corbusier's attitude could be explained by his early contact with Ruskin. His aim was to develop an architecture which created opportunities for man's experience of nature.¹ It could perhaps be discussed, if Forty doesn't underestimate Ruskin's influence for the American tradition, in which he places Wright. Forty doesn't discuss Gaudi, though it seems obvious that none of the modernistic pioneers was more engaged in the relation between artefact and nature. Gaudi's ongoing studies of the nature, closely imitating not only construction and structure but also form and details, have a totally different character than Wright's and Corbusier's. For Sigfried Giedion, the first example of how a large building complex – the size of a small town – was planned and placed in direct interplay to nature was Versailles. The coordination between building and nature was to become a permanent element thereafter.²

In 1940 Alfred Roth published the volume *La Nouvelle Architecture*, in three languages and with twenty examples, with the aim to promote the development of a new architecture. According to Roth, the new architecture was not only a work of architects, but included all human problems, with ideas from science, technique, economy, and art. It was this manysidedness that made the new architecture the most important social and cultural movement in its time. But Roth also emphasized the new architecture's dependence on the renewal at the turn of the century, which had abandoned the eclecticism, which had lost all contact with the tradition. Other important factors were the technical innovations, the social changes, and a new consciousness of the contemporary. The new architecture had been most successful in the small, democratic nations, Finland, Holland, Sweden, and Switzerland, even if the ideas were adopted from the centres, Vienna, Berlin, Paris. Roth saw the lack of a historic and architectonic tradition as an advantage. He stressed the social aspect, with the human scale as a criterion, by which all standpoints must be measured. But also the local connection was important, with consideration to topography, viewpoints, climate, material and living-conditions. These must be given priority to rigid formal or constructive principles. The natural factors gave a basis that decided

the vital relations between architecture and nature in the broadest sense of the word. – Frankness and imagination form the source of living architectural wealth. The honesty with which all questions are treated is expressed in the clear spatial structure, the clear constructive execution, and the proper application of the materials. Spatial and constructive clarity are the immediate premises for the beauty of a building. – Finally, the new buildings contribute with their simple forms, genuine materials and poised colouring to form the general taste.

In the centre of the aesthetic and architectonic experience stood

the space corresponding to the material and psychical requirements of Mankind, and the connective succession of space. For the free shaping of these, intuitive imagination has as its disposal the almost unlimited possibilities of construction, material, natural or artificial lightning, and the inclusion of Nature.³

The Nordic discussion

Among the Swedish architects, Carl Westman was a pioneer in the ambition to find new ways to relate to nature. This wish to integrate house and garden, with Wright as a main inspirator, was evident in a project, Börjehus, from 1898 by Carl Westman for the sculptor John Börjeson, situated on a small island in the archipelago of Stockholm. Westman, recently returned from US and England, used his lessons from Wright and Voysey in order to create a house that expressed his new ideals. The free plan is organized with a central, two-storey high, hall with an open fire as a central focus. A staircase and a narrow balcony give access to the second floor, permitting the daylight to flow in from various openings, at the same time permitting outlooks in different directions.

The interiors are light and varied, references to the late eighteenth century classicism could be found in the master bedroom, equipped with rococo furniture. In the exterior long verandas, decorated in Voysey's way, mediate the transition from the house to the rocky ground. Balconies on the second floor present outlooks towards the sea.

Westman, in his turn, provided inspiration for a new generation of architects in the late thirties and early forties,

when the problem of modern architecture once again aroused the interest of the architects. In order to contrast the obsolete classicism to an architecture in accordance with nature, Leif Reinius referred to Ivar Tengbom's criticism of a mau-soleum in the academic tradition from 1890 by Westman:

Familjegraven utstrålar den kvantitativt stora, mäktiga rikemännens krampaktiga sista försök att synas och imponera. Man nästan hör ett majestätiskt avgrundsrytande eka ut från stenvalven – och som på halva vägen möts av ett skallande skratt från vår respektlösa tid. Härmed inte så mycket ont sagt om familjegravens arkitektur, som är virtuos och skojig på sitt sätt. Arkitekturen, som med varje medel skall synas även in i döden, har nu kanske avlösts av arkitekturen som vill tjäna livet – när den är som bäst – och liksom den gode tjänaren vill synas så litet som möjligt (och som helst strör den dödes aska för vinden).

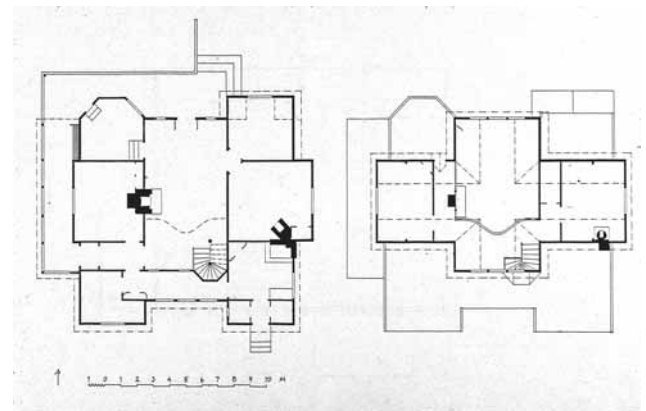
Reinius compared this with the projects for new housing districts, as Traneberg and Fredhäll in Stockholm from the thirties and forties, integrating buildings and landscape. Hardly architecture in the traditional, academic meaning, they now were appreciated as the architect had permitted the landscape to dominate over architecture, in his desire to create a pleasant milieu:

Livets härlighet fördelas på flera händer – åtminstone något av den. I stället för att till varje pris synas, så försöker man rätt och slätt att vara. Fastän det är svårt det också.⁴

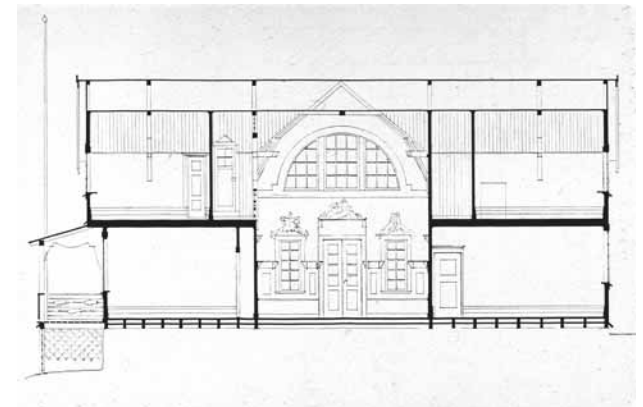
Reinius expressed a new, radical attitude. The natural, open landscape, integrating informal buildings, was presented as superior to the manifest, built architecture. This positive link between architecture and nature was a common feature in Reinius' outlook.⁵ Greatly impressed especially by the American villa architecture, he made a quotation from Frank Lloyd Wright his own:

Organic architecture
all forms integral
natural to site
materials
process of construction
and purpose.

Wright's talent for integrating the building with the ground, without visible levels, following the rhythm of the surroun-



The fireplace dominates the central room, a two-storey hall. Smaller rooms are grouped around the hall. Verandas and balconies create sheltered transitional areas between outdoors and indoors. C. Westman, *Börjehus*, plan. Drawing 1977.



The entrance wall is symmetrically arranged. A classical term window, placed in the upper storey, permits the clear daylight to flow into the hall. C. Westman, *Börjehus*, section. Drawing 1977.

ding landscape, made it difficult to distinguish where the ground ended and the building began. The ideal solution was to form the home as an indoor garden and the garden as an outdoor home. Low horizontal buildings with generous openings towards the garden strengthened the impression.⁶ For Reinius this was a reflexion of the open and generous American society. This view, architecture as reflecting the society, was also explicit when he, in a polemical tone, discussed the differences between Norwegian and Danish contemporary architecture:



Decorative motives, inspired from nature, are sawed out in the railings and accentuate the play between light and shadow on the spacious veranda. C. Westman, *Börjehus, the veranda*. Photo J. Berg 1974.



Originally the house was painted in white and light green shades. In the thirties it was repainted in darker red and blue, more in accordance with traditional Swedish than Westman's Anglo-American, patterns. C. Westman, *Börjehus, exterior*. Photo J. Berg 1974.

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Comparing the projects presented in *Hus i Norge* with the projects in *Huse i Denmark*, he preferred the Norwegian model, where he found opportunities to identification, both with the material conditions and with the human character:

Genomgående är det dock ett visst karakteristiskt drag, som vi kan kalla norskt (i vissa fall lika gärna svenskt) och som ju är betingat av klimat, behov, materialåtgång (som till allra största delen är trä) och av de människors förmåga, som gjort husen.⁷

The discussion in *Byggmästaren* engaged architects from the other Nordic countries. Tobias Faber and Jørn Utzon referred to nature as the true source of inspiration, for architecture as for art in general. The infinite abundance of nature provided unlimited possibilities. A free and personal expression could only be achieved by a complete understanding of and contact with nature.⁸

Almost forty years later, Nils-Ole Lund discussed the Nordic tradition with only a few references to nature, the first in a discussion of the Norwegian fifties. Another source of inspiration was travels to the Mediterranean cultures, e.g. Morocco, and pre-industrial living conditions. The aim was to create a more human technology, and nature could be used as a model, demonstrating the possibility to shape forms, in the same time complex and diversified. Lund referred to Aalto's picture of the cherry blossom as an example of the possibilities of standardization.⁹ Faber and Utzon used Aalto's analogy, the construction of the plants by small, identical elements, which in combination gave "uendelig Rigdom og Storhed – i rumlig, i stofflig, formmæssig og farvemæssig Henseende."¹⁰

Lund quoted Faber's and Utzon's manifesto from 1947, *Tendenser i Nutidens Arkitektur*, where they referred to the architecture of the nature. It was easy to visualize the elementary influences, which created the basis for experience and understanding:

Naar man derfor er i Naturen saavel som i Arkitektur, maa man registrere sine Sanseindtryk og Fornemmelser – øve Øje

og Sind i at oppfatte Rum, Form, Lys, Skygge og Farve, og man maa prøve at finde frem til de ganske enkle Love, som findes i Naturen. Men man maa ikke nøjes med passivt at glæde sig over en Skønhed, men ogsaa prøve paa at analysere den Paavirkning man modtager, selvom det selvfølgelig er selve Oplevelsen – og ikke Analysen for sin egen Skyld – der er det væsentligste.

Lund pointed to another interpretation of the relation between architecture and nature in a quotation from Sverre Fehn:

Ethvert memmeske er inderst inde en arkitekt. Når han går ud i naturen, tager han sit første skridt mot arkitekturen. Han lægger sin sti som en skrift på jordens overflade. Når han med sin styrke tramper græsset ned, griber han ind i naturen – en enkel definition av kulturen. Hans sti er et tegn, man skal følge. Dette er den mest elementære komposition.¹¹

The landscape was presented as an original source for architecture, the culture grew out from nature in a direct and physical connection.

Aalto's role as an advocate for the organical architecture was, according Lund, typical for the ambition to connect wood and Finnish mentality:

Erindringen om skovens og træernes beskyttende favn lever endnu skjult i vor kollektive finske sjæl. — Vi må formode, at vi finner baserer vor rumsdisposition på en slags skovens geometri.¹²

These examples illustrate how diverse the ideas on the relation between architecture and nature could be. One example is a general attitude, that architecture should be subordinated to nature, at the same time inspired by and existing on the conditions of nature. The landscape forms the framework, to which the architecture must adapt. Aalto, Faber, and Utzon, who sought solutions for some of the modern society's problem, following standardization and industrialization, express a second, more instrumentalist view. For them, nature could provide forms and combinations to be used as models. And, finally, both Reinius and Aalto could discern a national spirit in architecture. But common for all are the belief in nature as a true source of inspiration, a way out of the petrification of classicism, eclecticism, or formal modernism.

The examples are contradictory to Forty's position, namely that the interest for nature didn't regain its actuality until the environmental movement in the sixties. His standpoint that modernism lacked interest in nature is not valid, at least not in the Nordic countries. On the contrary, as these examples illustrate, the question of connections between nature and architecture was lively debated in all the Nordic countries during the forties and fifties. In the debate, references were made to a wide range of architectural expressions. The ambition to create an architecture that related to the nature, could also be translated into specific architectural qualities, such as light, contact between room and garden – visual or physical, indoors-outdoors, placing in the landscape. It's possible to distinguish different meanings in the concept:

- The connection between building and garden: transitions, entrances, exits
- Element that penetrates into other territories: balconies, terraces, verandas
- Outlooks, the framed opening, the borrowed landscape
- The organic form
- The natural materials, effects of material and colouring
- The interest for the light, daylight, the windows
- Ecological and climatic adaptation

Inspiration from nature

The concept of Nature and derivations from it is often used in Nordic analyses and presentations of buildings. A high value of nature, and especially the Nordic one, seems implicit. Often described is a specific, Nordic, relation to the nature, a quality that is missing among other nations. One could easily imagine a reminiscence from Montesquieu's ideas on the importance of the climatic factors, as well as a nationalistic undertone and a nostalgic longing back to a society of less complexity.

When the discussion is more concrete, nature is related with specific architectonic qualities as sun and light, windows, outlooks, transitions between building and garden, relation to the surrounding landscape, natural materials, climatically adaptation, ecology or organic form. Also to be discussed in this context are the nature's elements, earth, air, water, vegetation. The question of the relation between architecture and nature intensifies with the criticism of the



Dramatically draped from the banisters in the upper floor, the colourful great flag from the years of the union between Sweden and Norway adds a nationalistic and rather pompous tone to the inspiring, informal milieu. C. Westman, Börjehus, the hall. Photo J. Berg 1974.

modernism during the thirties and early forties. But the search for architectural qualities as light, variation, informality, and contact with nature, expressed in the debate and in practise, was not new. It had started already in the late nineteenth century, as Alfred Roth emphasized and Carl Westman illustrates.

What is the intention of connecting the built and the non-built, the artefact and the natural? My thesis is, that the concept of Nature is used in descriptions of Nordic architecture in order to associate to positively valued qualities, as artlessness, simplicity, originality, sincerity, authenticity, spontaneity, creativity. The concept is used to represent an innate character, in contrast to “borrowed” qualities, as style or form. But latent one can read a critique of the civilization, where architecture is given the task to bridge the cleavage between nature and culture, a cleavage that in another context was formulated by early psychoanalysts as Sigmund Freud or Erich Fromm.¹³

Notes

1. A. Forty, *Words and Buildings, A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson 2000, p. 220–238. Forty pointed out a list of definitions of the possible relations: Nature as the source of beauty in architecture; the origin of architecture; the valorization of architecture; ‘mimesis’, or the imitation of nature; nature invoked to justify artistic licence; as a political idea; nature as freedom, lack of constraint; ‘Nature’ as a construct of the viewer’s perception; art as a ‘second nature’; nature as the antidote to ‘culture’; the rejection of nature; environmentalism; nature as ecosystem; and the critique of capitalism.
2. S. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1944 p. 21.
3. A. Roth, *La Nouvelle Architecture*, Zürich: H. Girsberger 1940, p. 7–9.
4. L. Reinius, “1890-1920-1940 eller boken ”Trettioalets byggnadskonst i Sverige””, *Byggmästaren* 1944:13, p. 219–220.
5. As late as 1988 Reinius published an article in *Arkitektur*, “Wright contra Corbu”. Other examples are 1984:6 (Gaudi), 1959: 8, (Wright), 1958:8 (Wright and Zevi), 1949:9 (Italy), 1948:15, 17, 20 (Wright) 1944:7.
6. L. Reinius, “Glimtar från USA”, *Byggmästaren* 1944:17, p. 319.
7. L. Reinius, “Hus i Norge. Odd Brochman: “Hus i Norge””, *Byggmästaren* 1944:18, p. 337–338.
8. T. Faber, J. Utzon, “Tendenser i nutidens arkitektur”, *Byggmästaren* 1947:5, p. 66.
9. N-O. Lund, *Nordisk arkitektur*, Köpenhamn: Arkitektens forl. 1991, p. 70.
10. N-O. Lund, *Nordisk arkitektur*, Köpenhamn: Arkitektens forl. 1991, p. 70–71, quotation from *Arkitektens Maanadshæfte* 1947, p. 63–69.
11. S. Fehn, from N-O. Lund, *Nordisk arkitektur*, Köpenhamn: Arkitektens forl. 1991, p. 70.
12. N-O. Lund, *Nordisk arkitektur*, Köpenhamn: Arkitektens forl. 1991, p. 140. Lund quotes J. Pallasmaa, *Skogens arkitektur, Sagt i trä*, 1987.
13. S. Freud, *Vi vantrivas i kulturen*, Stockholm: Bonnier 1932; E. Fromm, *Flykten från friheten*, Stockholm: Natur och kultur 1945.



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